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AUTHOR	Brickman, Bette; Nuzzo, Richard
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction for non-native speakers in higher education distinguishes the needs of immigrants who are residents from those of foreign students with temporary student visas, and looks at how those needs affect the design of classes and programs to serve them. Data are drawn from experience with one community college ESL program and from the literature. Several categories of characteristics of the two groups are examined: attitude and motivation (attitudes about leaving the homeland, nature of language needs, degree of acculturation or integration); educational traditions and learning styles (learning environments, level of conversational skills, level of community involvement, students' learning styles); and additional considerations emerging in the literature (degree of individual student participation in class activities, nature of English spoken on arrival, comprehension and academic skills, nature and amount of background knowledge brought to the classroom). Changes made in one community college program, based on this information, are noted. (Contains 25 references.) (MSE)

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International Versus Immigrant ESL Students

Designing Curriculum And Programs to Meet the Needs of Both

Bette Brickman
Instructor

Richard Nuzzo
Department Chair

Community College of Southern Nevada
Department of International Languages
3200 East Cheyenne Avenue
North Las Vegas, NV 89030

Daytime phone: (702) 651-4104
Evening phone: (702) 454-4581
E-mail: brickman@nevada.edu
Fax: (702) 454-6892

(702) 651-4115

nuzzo@nevada.edu

Dr. Bette Brickman is an instructor of ESL at the Community College of Southern Nevada. She has published articles on teaching ESL writing, computer-assisted instruction, and teacher training.

Richard Nuzzo chairs the Department of International Languages at the Community College of Southern Nevada. He has worked extensively with ESL students for thirty years and has taught English in Colombia.

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Designing Curriculum and Programs to Meet the Needs of Both

Abstract

Many ESL programs teach two distinct non-native populations: those students who are residents and those internationals who have temporary student visas. Each specific group, especially initially, has needs that must be addressed by curriculum designers and instructors. For example, international students tend to be younger, experience culture shock upon arrival into the U.S.A. and have difficulty understanding spoken English. On the other hand, residents have adapted (to varying degrees) to another culture. Generally, they have fewer problems understanding spoken English than international students do, but they need more practical English skills for academic, vocational and/or personal reasons.

This paper focuses, first, on describing differences between the two student populations and, second, on designing classes and programs that meet the needs of both.

Background

An urban community college in a rapidly-growing area of the Southwest recently started an aggressive recruitment program of international students, primarily from the Pacific Rim. Prior to the program, ESL, which is a component of the Department of International Languages, enrolled approximately 900 ESL students each fall and spring semester and 500 during the summer. Most of the students were immigrants and represented some 58 countries.

The ESL program is academically-oriented. Although some students are learning English only for self-improvement, many plan to earn a degree from the community college; some intend

to seek at least a Bachelor's degree. Still others are professionals, such as physicians, engineers, lawyers, and teachers, who want to earn a degree in their field from an American university in order to practice their profession. Therefore, the ESL program stresses grammar, writing, reading, listening and speaking, and study skills.

Throughout the years, there have typically been fewer than 20 international (non-resident) students in the program per semester. Those students do integrate, but we have identified a need to develop a different approach to teaching them than we do with our residents. Since we anticipate an increasing number of international students, we have been planning to help them integrate and attain the most benefits from their classes.

In talking to the director of an ESL program similar to ours in an urban community college in the western United States, we learned that her program had begun as a program for residents but had rapidly developed into an extensive program that now enrolls some 2300 international students. This director confirmed some of the problems we had anticipated our program would experience if our community college were to develop as large an international program and if we had not planned to teach to the needs of two distinct groups of ESL students.

Although not all students fit a stereotype, and the differences between the immigrant and international students tend to blur given time and interaction, initially the differences are distinct. What are those differences? The following are some details, both from the literature and from what we have observed.

Attitude and Motivation

The motivation to learn English may vary markedly between immigrant and international students (Littlewood, 1984). Immigrant students have usually been in the United States longer

than internationals. They may feel homesickness for their native countries, but they realize that they have left their native land for good; some are in the process of attaining American citizenship. Furthermore, many immigrants are employed and feel they are part of the American working system. To varying degrees, they speak English both on the job and socially. They are genuinely interested in Americans and want to learn both formal and informal English so that they can have closer contact with the culture (Littlewood). These students are particularly interested in learning American idioms and jargon. Furthermore, they learn English to improve their job and to help their children with homework. Their motivation is intrinsic or integrative.

On the other hand, international students are temporary residents whose motives for learning English may be more limited. For example, they may want to learn formal English because knowledge of business English is valued in their native countries. Also, they may be learning English only as a lingua franca in order to communicate with many nationalities (Littlewood). In addition, learning English may help them to attain a certificate or pass a university entrance examination. Therefore, their motivation is more instrumental. These students have every intention of returning to their native countries, so they retain their culture and many times live together with people of their nationality, thereby decreasing their opportunities and need to use communicative English.

In addition, many international students, especially those without sponsor families, may not succeed academically or have difficulties with their studies for other reasons related to cultural adaptation. They may be preoccupied with housing (apartment contracts and leases), transportation (obtaining a vehicle, driver's license, registration), insurance (auto), banking, food, and legal matters (car accidents, injuries). Some end up in dangerous areas of the town or city and

are victims of crime. All of these factors may cause more stress for internationals than for immigrants, who have usually adapted to the culture (or are well on their way), and who have knowledge of basic survival or living skills, understand spoken English, and have the support of family and friends.

This may be why international students tend to form bonds and stay with students from their own ethnic background and continue to use their native language, thereby reducing their exposure to English and American culture. However, those students who do establish bonds with students of other cultures and language backgrounds generally use English as the language of communication.

Educational Traditions and Learning Styles

International students, especially those from Pacific Rim countries, have been exposed to a more rigid educational system than is generally found in the United States. Song (1995) states that the educational system, influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, stresses "conformity, obedience, and passivity" (p. 35). Such values are regarded as important for maintaining a structured society. Teachers are afforded great respect; in fact, a question for clarification may be regarded as an affront to the teacher, who apparently had not explained well enough if questions remain. Students are prepared for lecture format, where the teacher imparts knowledge, while the students passively absorb and memorize it (Tang & Dunkelblau, 1998). Students are not expected to contribute to the learning process, so class participation and group interaction is almost non-existent. International students first confronted with the more relaxed, student-centered classroom of American higher education feel at first that they are not learning anything.

In contrast, many immigrant students have attended school in the United States and/or have children now in the system. Many of them begin language training at the intermediate or advanced levels (at least in speaking) only after having established themselves in the community). They may still feel uncomfortable responding to teacher questions and participating in group work. However, they have had more exposure to the flexibility of American education and through contact with the culture, have been exposed to a more egalitarian system, where the ideas of the students are elicited. On the negative side, they may dominate class discussions, thereby alienating international students, if strict turn-taking guidelines are not in place.

Kurita (1994) explains that Japanese students are generally weaker in conversation than in other language skills because their English teachers have focused on the grammar translation methods, mainly to prepare students to pass university entrance examinations. In addition, cultural tradition has dictated that the teacher speak in class; volunteering answers, especially by calling them out, is atypical in the Japanese educational system. Moreover, many Japanese students fear making a mistake in front of the teacher and their peers.

Park (1997) maintains that Korean students face similar transition problems when studying in the United States. In Korea, attention to learning strategies has traditionally been neglected, and teachers stress transmitting knowledge about English without teaching students how to learn. Korean students are accustomed to absorbing knowledge in the classroom, but they don't know how to learn outside of the educational setting (Li, 1998). In addition, English instructors in Korea concentrate on vocabulary, grammar and reading while ignoring speaking, listening, and writing. At Korean universities, the English curriculum broadens to include speaking and listening. Although communicative language teaching methods have recently been advocated by the Korean

government, there are problems in implementing these techniques (Li). Therefore, concentration has remained on grammar-translation methods.

Park also surveyed students as to the learning strategies they used most. Most Korean students favored cognitive strategies over social and affective; they tended to avoid social interaction to learn English, preferring to rely on memorization. Therefore, Park recommends teaching Korean students language learning strategies and limiting the number of students per class so that individual needs can be addressed. (Detailed descriptions of ESL/EFL language learning strategies are found in Chamot, 1989, 1993; Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Cohen, 1990; LoCastro, 1994; O'Malley, 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, Lavine & Crookall, 1989; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, & Sumrall 1993; Rubin, 1987; Wenden, 1991).

Additional Problem Areas and Suggestions From the Literature

For conversation and reading classes, Song addresses the problem of unequal participation by initially pairing international students with immigrants. Partners are changed frequently, giving students the opportunity to interact with various students from cultural backgrounds; this also helps to avoid awkward silences in whole-class discussions. We have found that occasionally pairing same nationality immigrants and international students (specifying English as the language of interaction) is a successful means of fostering participation.

An additional problem teachers encounter is that immigrants may appear to speak a fluent, but non-standard English, which they have learned from Americans and non-native English speakers (Scarcella, 1996). Even though they have a high school diploma, they may still have problems with verbs, prepositions, and vocabulary (using the wrong word form). Furthermore, in formal academic situations, these students may use inappropriate, informal language, a language

that may actually be reinforced by group work. Therefore, Scarcella recommends a "balance" of classroom activities and teacher correction of errors to avoid the propagation of these language problems.

Listening comprehension and note-taking skills are integral to the success of all students. In studies by Ferris and Tagg (1996a) and Ferris (1998), instructors and students were asked what listening and speaking tasks students require to succeed in certain courses. Although the skill levels differ among the disciplines, effective note-taking ability and good aural/oral skills were rated as very important. However, with instructor styles becoming less formal and instructor demands becoming more vague at American postsecondary institutions, ESL students are at an apparent disadvantage (Ferris & Tagg). To solve this problem, instructors should "expose [ESL students] to different presentation styles and note-taking" (p. 52). In addition, it is important to help students develop the confidence to interact with peers and instructors. The trend is to have students work in groups and then report to the class as a group rather than as individuals.

Another problem area for international students (Song) is critiquing literature. Song's successful method of improving her students' skills in this area is having students record their responses, feelings, reactions and questions in journals, which then form the point of departure for class discussion.

Song stresses the need to give explicit instructions and examples of assignments and to reserve a lot of free time for individual student conferences. Finally, she encourages international students to get tutors, whom students may feel more comfortable asking for clarification and help. As several authors have documented (Peitzman, 1996) assignments that are vague encourage students, especially internationals, to plagiarize--copy from books, other students, material from

the Internet, etc.--because they fear seeking clarification from the teacher. They may not have understood the assignment and/or lacked the necessary language skills to respond on their own. One mitigating complication is that plagiarism (quoting without citation) is acceptable in some cultures, where it is regarded as showing respect for the authors.

An additional hurdle to comprehension which weighs more heavily on newly-arrived internationals than on immigrants is a lack of background knowledge. Schema and comprehension theory involve "the reader's ability to organize information and connect new knowledge to knowledge he or she already possesses" (Hsiu-Chieh and Graces, 1995, p. 664). Many ESL students are exposed to a variety of reading selections whose authors assume the readers possess the requisite background knowledge. Immigrants, on average, have had more opportunity to acculturate, having resided longer in the United States than internationals. Therefore, it is important to provide numerous pre-reading activities and background knowledge to enhance comprehension.

Encouraging students to develop speaking and listening skills is the focus of a subsequent study by Ferris and Tagg (1996b). Instructors should acknowledge cultural differences yet also encourage ESL students, especially internationals, to develop an American style of classroom interaction, a style which may appear intimidating even to immigrant students. Schmidt-Rinehart (1997) also emphasizes the importance of exposing students to different methods of learning:

> The mission of the educator in the classroom as well as the instructional designer is to choose or design learning activities that accommodate existing learning styles while at the same time affording students the opportunity to develop styles they do not possess. (p.230)

Given the above (simplified) initial differences in student populations, what kind of curriculum and programs can be developed to help immigrant and international students assimilate and maximize their learning experiences?

Conclusion

The ESL program at our community college is currently doing a needs assessment to plan for the influx of international students attracted by the college's aggressive recruiting program. Part of the assessment is a survey of ESL students to determine their specific reasons for learning English and what skills they would like to learn more comprehensively. Part of the survery queries student reactions to different teacher styles and approaches toward teaching English.

The community college is also offering study skills classes for international students. These classes emphasize note-taking techniques as well as different styles of classroom interaction. Students take study skills upon entering the program and are made aware of the educational differences between their native countries and the United States.

An adjunct service available to all students is the tutorial program. Funded through student government, tutorial consultants match students individually with tutors who then give each student up to twelve hours of free instruction per semester. Students have requested that some instruction be in the form of small-group discussions (three to five students) of mixed language backgrounds, where all attendees have the opportunity to participate.

In addition, the international student program has scheduled a series of parties, dances and field trips to familiarize students with the city and its resources. The positive impact of such activities is emphasized by Schmidt-Rinehart (1997), "Prearranged interaction with adults and

informal gatherings give [foreign students] not only practice but insight into the everyday culture of the country" (p. 206). Since the events are open to all ESL students and college faculty, both immigrant and international students participate. To date, a greater percentage of international students have taken advantage of the social events. Finally, the international students have formed an Ambassador Program, where on a rotating basis, selected students serve as emissaries of their native countries.

Through needs assessments, research, and curriculum modification, we are designing one program to meet the needs of both immigrant and a growing number of international students. Our intentions are that through program modification, the international students will more quickly gain the necessary English skills and cultural knowledge to make them successful in their professions, wherever they may practice. Our community, on the other hand, will gain by interacting with a more culturally diverse student population.

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